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ABSTRACT

A study looked at the patterns of clarification questions and responses occurring in academic advisement interviews between graduate students (26 non-native English-speaking (NNS) and 7 native English-speaking (NS)) and native-speaker advisors. Tape-recorded interviews between students and a male graduate studies director, generally concerning university policy and course scheduling, were coded for information and clarification questions or statements. Advisor clarification strategies and student responses and clarification strategies were considered separately. Results show that clarification questions have different patterns in the native-speaker and non-native-speaker student groups. The advisor used more clarification questions with the NNS students, and more confirmation checks with the NSs. Both student groups issued clarification questions to the same degree, but with differently weighted functions, clarification vs. rapport. It is proposed that teachers of English as a Second Language teach students the distinction between clarification questions and confirmation checks, which may be interpreted only as conversational continuants. In addition, it is recommended that teachers seek explicit ways of teaching discourse norms to help students learn communicative strategies that sustain conversation and avoid communicative failures. A 28-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Clarification Strategies in the Advisement Interview

BETHYL A. PEARSON

This paper marshals evidence for the claim that TESL instruction can benefit by relying more heavily on direct examples of spoken English discourse. It argues that analysis of naturally-occurring conversation can help ESL students, who straddle two linguistic and cultural worlds, increase their communicative proficiency (Taylor, 1988). Using data from natural conversations in a series of intra- and cross-cultural academic advisement interviews conducted with thirty-three students by an American graduate studies director at a major university, this paper shows how clarification question and response patterns of both conversational participants display negotiation strategies that convey not only referential but also important social meaning.

By focusing on clarification question and response patterns in graduate advisement interviews, this study provides models for students to learn how to better respond to the clarification questions posed to them by native speakers (NS) and also how to better confirm their understanding. In addition, the study also alerts the teachers to make their ESL students aware of the fact that confirmation checks in NS speech (the advisor's speech in this study) can also encode a negative challenge that may require special response skills for the non-native speakers (NNS), who may either respond too minimally or come across as too controlling. Finally, this paper encourages TESL instructors to more closely examine these and other question-types in natural conversation in order to equip their ESL students with strategies to better conduct not only crucial institutional encounters, but ordinary conversational exchanges as well.

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Review of Relevant Literature

Questions in general have played a central analytic role for sociolinguistic researchers of several types of institutional discourse, including discourse in medical (e.g., West, 1983), legal (e.g., Philips, 1984), as well as educational (e.g., Mehan, 1979) settings. Typically, two categories of questions characteristic of two speaker roles have been observed: (a) the information questions of the

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higher-ranking speaker, (i.e., the doctor, the lawyer, the teacher), which perform the dual functions of eliciting information and controlling the exchange (Goody, 1978), and (b) metalinguistic questions (which comprise clarification and confirmation questions) of the lower-ranking speaker, which are claimed to be one of the few means by which the client participates (Agar, 1985; Shuy, 1983). In addition, Danet (1984) has also shown that higher-ranking speakers can also use clarification questions coercively.

The burgeoning number of analyses of cross-cultural discourse in higher education gatekeeping encounters (e.g., Carpenter, 1983; Fiksdal, 1988; Erickson and Shultz, 1982; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1988) is indexical of the growing concern for isolating what kinds of linguistic choices in the academic interview process result in either positive or negative social outcomes for the student. A common conclusion of these studies is that NNSs are less successful at achieving positive outcomes than NSs, chiefly because they break the rules of social appropriateness of the target language and culture.

Second language acquisition (SLA) studies have attributed special significance to the second category of questions, i.e., clarification, confirmation, and comprehension questions. They are claimed to be instrumental in making input comprehensible to the learner 1(Long, 1983a). These questions may be defined as follows. *Confirmation checks*, according to Long and Sato (1983):

> involve exact or semantic, complete or partial repetition of the previous speaker's utterance, are encoded as either Yes/No or uninverted (rising intonation) questions (there is a presupposition of a "Yes" answer), and serve either to elicit confirmation that their user had heard and/or understood the previous speaker's previous utterance correctly or to dispel that belief. (275)

An example of such a clarification question strategy from the interview data is a check by the advisor on his understanding of a student's previous utterance, "So you're gonna take the test?".

Comprehension checks are any expressions by an NS designed to establish whether that speaker's preceding utterance has been understood by the interlocutor. An example of such question would be, "You understand that?" *Clarification requests* are any expressions by an NS designed to elicit clarification of the interlocutor's preceding utterance. Clarification requests are most

frequently realized by questions, such as "OK, what is your question now?", but they are also occasionally encoded in statements like "I don't understand," and through imperatives like "Try again" (Long and Sato, 1983, 276).

SLA researchers have studied the significance of these clarification checks, targeting them as interactional adjustments which NS's make in order to provide comprehensible input to NNS's. Although SLA research does not conclusively show the necessity of these and other types of "metalinguistic input" (Schachter, 1986) for language learning, the studies suggest that they are desirable (Long, 1981; 1983a; 1983b). For instance, Pica (1987) has suggested that these question-types be treated as NS triggers for NNS output. Although NNS response modifications to produce target-language like responses were minimal because the NS performed the modification for them in these situations, they can have an indirect effect on the acquisition process. In addition, they have also been studied as the NNSs "restructuring moves" (Pica, 1987, 7) which serve as catalysts for NS assistance (or even other NNS assistance in NNS-NNS conversations (Varonis and Gass, 1985) in understanding linguistic material beyond the L2 repertoire. These moves are believed to facilitate the learner's comprehension and production of the target language (Pica, 1987).

Further, in the occurrence of clarification questions, social considerations intersect with linguistic issues . For instance, Pica, Doughty and Young (1986) and Pica (1987) show that social factors can mitigate against the use of clarification questions however desirable student restructuring moves may be in facilitating SLA. In the asymmetrical power setting of the classroom, they claim, students avoid clarification requests as well as comprehension and confirmation checks because they perceive such strategies as unwelcome challenges to the teacher. In a similar vein, Thomas (1984) argues that what an NNS may intend as a simple metalinguistic comment (e.g., "What do you mean?") can be perceived by the NS as a metapragmatic one, often a challenge.

Thus, while it is true that clarification questions are potentially very important as facilitators of language growth by providing comprehensible language input to the learner (Long, 1983) and in triggering output both from the learner (Pica, 1988) and from the NS (Pica, 1987), it appears that social constraints dictate the patterns of their use. For instance, in advisement interviews, as in other types of institutional discourse, students would be expected to use clarification questions in order to comprehend the advisor's

metalinguistic messages. However, in light of the conclusions of Pica (1987) in the classroom, they might at the same time be conscious of appearing to be too challenging, and resist production of these question-types.

However, Fiksdal (1988, 14) provides some evidence that NS students, relative to NNS, will use more confirmation checks. She mentions that clarification metastatements, i.e., confirmation checks, such as "So what you're saying is . . ." were present in NS responses to the advisor's bad news, but categorically absent in comparable NNS speech. She claims that these checks are crucial in maintaining rapport, and points out that NNS interviews in her study evidenced communication breakdowns without use of confirmation checks.

I drew upon Fiksdal's conclusions, as well as Pica's admonitions, above, in hypothesizing that NSs would use more confirmation checks than NNSs. Contrary to these expectations, however, results show that these checks occurred in NS and NNS speech equivalently, and with successful discourse consequences, despite one major exception noted below.

Similarly, on the part of the advisor in this interactive situation, although information questions would be prevalent in the advisor's speech to both NSs and NNSs, it might be expected that more clarification questions will be used in the interviews with NNSs.

In fact, Carpenter (1983), in her study of intra- and cross-cultural advisement interviews, found that over half of the advisors' questions to NNSs were clarification questions, while less than one-fourth of the questions addressed to NSs comprised these types. Carpenter, in her data base of interviews with twenty-four NSs and four NNSs found that only 22.7 percent of the total number of questions directed to NSs were metalinguistic types, while fully 55.6 percent of questions directed to NNSs belonged to this overall category. She argued that confirmation requests that summarized or repeated previous information accounted for this discrepancy, noting that this sub-type was used on average 4.8 times across all of the NNS interviews, while as many as 11 NS conversations contained none at all, with an average of only .75 instances per conversation.

In light of Carpenter's (1987) findings, I hypothesized that more confirmation checks would occur in speech directed to NNSs than to NSs.

Additionally, unlike the previous studies where clarification questions have been analyzed from only one of the participants' speech corpus (either the advisor or the advisee (see especially

Carpenter, 1983)); my analysis focuses on these questions in the speech of both conversational participants across the total discourse event and identifies the nature of the interlocutor responses to these question-types.

Method

Data for this study was derived from 44 tape-recorded advisement interviews between graduate students and a male university graduate studies director at a major U.S. university. This director is the general gatekeeper for the department. He addresses immediate issues about university policy and course scheduling which have to be handled before the students find departmental, long-term advisors who are connected to their special fields of study.

Only those appointments for which the major purpose was obtaining academic advice about course selection, credits, and related institutional procedure were considered, which eliminated eleven interviews and left 33---26 NNSs and 7 NSs, with the majority of participants being male (4 NNS females; 1 NS female).

The interviews averaged 10 minutes in length. All NNSs had achieved a score of 550 and above on the TOEFL. Both groups of speakers were composed of new and returning graduate students. All interview appointments were initiated by the students, who sought appropriate advice in order to register for the semester.

Criteria of Data Analysis

Questions were first coded into two general categories: information and clarification. Statements were considered questions if they appeared to seek a verbal response, as suggested by a following pause in which the listener was expected to respond. Metalinguistic questions(clarification questions) were sub-categorized into clarification requests (e.g., Ok, what are you asking?), confirmation checks (e.g., You mean you want to take it later?) and comprehension checks (e.g., You understand?).

Data Analysis and Results

Data have been analyzed in two parts, the advisor's clarification strategies and student responses and students' clarification strategies.

The Advisor's clarification strategies

The advisor asked a total of 302 questions. The breakdown of the questions into information - clarification and NS - NNs categories is presented in Table 1.

Table1: Comparison of Numbers of Information Questions and Clarification Questions in the Advisor's Speech in Advisement Interviews

Speaker Type	Information		Clarification		Total
	%	N	%	N	
NNS	73.4	182	26.6	66	248
NS	81.5	44	18.5	10	54
Note: Clarification questions here include comprehension and confirmation checks and clarification requests					

Clearly, in both data sets clarification questions are less frequent than information types in the director's speech. In addition, out of the total number of questions directed to NNS's 73.4% were information and 26.6% were clarification types which is only slightly than the ratio of the two question types directed to the NSs. These findings show a marked difference from the findings of Carpenter (1983, 188-9), which showed that fully 55.6% of the advisor's questions to NNSs were clarification, while only 22.7% of these types were addressed to NSs.

Carpenter (1983, 189) claims that the major source of the difference in question usage in the NS versus NNS data is attributable to requests for confirmation. She found many more occurrences of confirmation checks in the advisor's speech in the NNS compared to the NS interviews. She suggests that the difference is attributable to a combination of the following: (a) in NS/NS interviews everything is rightly or wrongly felt to be already understood, (b) requests of this sort can be used to belittle someone or to express disbelief or to coerce someone in legal settings, and are therefore intentionally avoided, especially in NS/NS exchanges, or (c) as a result of the general uncertainty in NS/NNS interactions, confirmation checks were used more in this setting to perform the additional function of pragmatically stalling for time in order to plan what to say next.

However, a detailed comparison of the sub-types of clarification questions in the present study showed that confirmation checks were prevalent not only in speech addressed to NNS's, but to NS's as well. Table 2 illustrates the relevant data.

Table 2: Comparison of Clarification Question Sub-types in the Advisor's Speech in NS vs. NNS Interviews

Question type	NNS		NS	
	%	n	%	n
Confirmation checks	50.0	[33]	80.0	[8]
Clarification requests	27.2	[18]	10.0	[1]
Comprehension checks	22.7	[15]	10.0	[1]

In the NNS data, 50% of the clarification questions were confirmation checks. The remaining half was evenly divided between clarification requests, 27.2%, and comprehension checks, 22.7%. In the NS data, fully 80% of the advisor's clarification questions were confirmation checks, while there was only one clarification request, "So what are you proposing, I'm not sure", and one comprehension check, "You'll pick them up, ok?".

Even on the basis of limited data, it is interesting to speculate why confirmation checks were prevalent in both data sets, rather than merely in language addressed to NNSs. I suggest it is because confirmation checks, unlike the other more direct clarification requests and comprehension checks 2, perform the paired functions of negotiating meaning and maintaining rapport. Varonis and Gass (1985, 82) have pointed out that confirmation checks, or "indicators" of non-understanding, may simultaneously serve the function of "conversational continuant", and that it is not always easy to disambiguate these purposes. I extend the function of "conversational continuant" to the even more social function of maintaining rapport, a potentially important goal in any conversation (see Brown & Levinson, 1978; 1987; Fiksdal, 1988 for details).

For instance, in excerpt 1 given below, the director may very well have understood what the NS student has said, but confirmation check (underlined) is used additionally both to sustain the conversation and to maintain rapport.

1 A: Are we looking at the uh 302 or the 303?
S: The filters course.
A: <u>Filters?</u>

S: Yes, I had a filters course, but I did a D in that.

On the other hand, some of the advisor's confirmation checks functioned in a somewhat coercive manner. Although none were directed to NSs, three different NNS subjects received confirmation checks of coercive type.

In the second excerpt presented below, the professor uses confirmation checks (underlined) to urge the student to rethink the basis for equivalency between courses taken in his native country and those required at the U.S. university. However, the student does not acknowledge the professor's expression of disbelief and comes off at best as non-deferential, and at worst, uncooperative and controlling.

2 S: This is the networks and fields what we had.
A: Networks and field that uh (3.0) that's uh a combination of really two courses. Were you was that a half year or a full year? I'm not sure how you how at your school you divided these up.
S: This was a half year.
A: Half year? (2.0) OK, I can see the networks part.
S: / /we've got two semesters and two semesters we've got five subjects and everything. And we've got a semester examination at the end of the semester. This is the way we proceed.
A: OK, well this is very similar, so this is one semester, though?
S: Right. This is a one-semester subject.
A: For one semester? Half a year?
S: Mm-hmm.
A: This is amazing because of the wide range of materials here. You see what you've done here in one semester, we have one semester of electrical networks, another semester of the fields and uh it's just difficult to conceive that you went into depth in all of these in all of these subjects.
S: We've done everything.

This and other student response patterns suggest areas where ESL learners need communicative work. For example, NS students typically respond to confirmation checks not only with agreement but with some repetition and/or expansion of the advisor's utterance as can be seen in excerpt 3. Repetition, it has been noted, may enhance solidarity (Brown and Levinson, 1978; 1987).

3 A: And just the fundamentals of the materials themselves. You said no, you haven't had that?
NS: No, I haven't had these; it's been mentioned, but never studied.

However, NNS's usually provide only minimal affirmative responses, sometimes eliciting further clarification requests from the advisor as shown in excerpt 4 and sometimes making themselves appear less cooperative as shown in excerpts 4 and 5:

4 NNS: I just went to the language center and they said asked me to come next semester.
A : Oh, for the test?
NNS: Yeah. (2.0)
A : So you're gonna take the test?
NNS: Yeah.
5 NNS: I think I major in the semi-conductor, solid-state.
A : Solid state?
NNS: Yes.

As mentioned, Pica's (1988) study with low-level proficiency NNS's revealed that in response to the NS's requests for clarification, confirmation or repetition, the learners only minimally modified their output because the NS performed the modification for them. However, the data in the interviews here with highly proficient speakers suggest that the NS (the advisor) often encourages student responses. He paused after calling for clarification (as in excerpt 2 above) and he also often allowed both NSs and NNSs to at least attempt to restate their utterance, especially when his clarification request seemed to be triggered by a student's own sense of difficulty or even embarrassment in presenting an uncomfortable topic, as in excerpt 6:

6 NNS: In the first semester you said that I could take a grading job with Dr. xxx. After that second semester you had given me a nomination for the graduate uh out-of-state tuition waiver because I had quite a good GPA because my father had expired in the second semester, so I had gone home. So uh after that tuition that means this is my first semester I have completed most of the course work now but in the January semester I really want to do some computer courses. That is just for one semester, but because I have completed

all the electrical courses so I don't have anything to take in spring semester, so but if I register for more than 6 credits I have to pay the out-of-state tuition, so I cannot take those courses, so if if it's possible I think my GPA has gone down because of last semester.

A : Yes, ok. Now, what is it that you want? I'm not sure.

NNS: Uh if it is possible for you can you give a nomination for just one semester this spring so I can complete two courses which I want to take in computer science?

A : OK, for the uh out-of-state tuition waiver?

NNS: Yes, yes.

To summarize, the data presented above clearly show that although the majority of the advisor's questions across both interview sets are information questions, clarification questions are also present in both sets, and more of the clarification checks occur in the speech he directs to NNSs. However, when the questions were sub-categorized, it was found that confirmation checks occurred more often in speech he directed to NSs; probably because these checks, unlike other metalinguistic questions, often encode rapport, and rapport was seen to be more salient in NS-NS exchanges than in Ns-NNS exchanges. In addition, the advisor's confirmation checks sometimes also encoded a challenge which was ignored by the NNS whose responses appeared to be overly controlling the conversation, as shown above.

The Students' Clarification Strategies

The findings presented in Table 3 demonstrate that both NSs and NNSs used similar types of questions to approximately the same extent. Information types were a majority in both cases. Unlike the subjects studied by Fiksdal (1988) who did not use "metastatements", the NNSs in this study did use confirmation "metastatements," although NSs used a slightly higher percentage than NNSs.

As Table 3 shows, although a majority of the total 267 questions asked by students across both interview sets were information questions, clarification types did occur in similar percentages in both sets. Note that confirmation checks were the only type of clarification question in the student data.

Table 3: Comparison of numbers of information questions and clarification questions in the students' speech in advisement interviews.

Speaker Type	Information		Clarification		Total
	%	N	%	N	
NNS	56	42	44	33	75
NS	63	121	37	71	192
Note: Clarification questions here include only confirmation checks					

There were no comprehension checks or clarification requests, probably because such questions are more direct, and comprehension checks, "You understand that?", imply an unacceptable power discrepancy of student/speaker over advisor/listener. Clarification requests, "Would you say that again?" still overtly demand extra conversational work. It is not surprising that the students did not want to be seen as challenging the director by using these more powerful and demanding types (Pica 1987; Thomas 1983). In contrast, confirmation checks are more acceptably indirect and polite, and therefore, perhaps a better strategy, socially speaking, for obtaining clarification.

As in the advisor's speech, the students' checks, both NS and NNS, overwhelmingly confirmed their already correct deductions. It therefore seems that the purpose of these checks is as much to sustain rapport as to obtain clarification. This claim can be supported by the fact that most confirmation checks were received with affirmative responses by the director, although in a few cases, (5 in the NNS data and 2 in the NS set), there was some additional qualification of the agreement. Only 8 out of 71 confirmation checks in the NNS data and 3 out of 33 in the NS data met with the director's disagreement. Therefore, only a minority of these checks counted as pure strategies for obtaining clarification. It should also be noted that, beyond purposes of clarification and rapport, these checks may simply provide students an allowable stalling time during which the advisor's explanations can be reprocessed or the contents of the next utterance can be planned. How or whether this opportunity for reprocessing aids in the negotiation of comprehended input for the NNS (Gass, 1988) remains to be tested formally, however.

The NNSs of this study seemed to be as adept at using these checks as the NSs, as shown in their encoding of the questions in linguistic choices which display surface similarity with those of the

NS. The majority of these confirmation questions for both groups began with conventional (and therefore, teachable) lexical items such as "so", "you mean", "well", "then", "that means", "in other words", and so on. Example 8 illustrates these uniform confirmation checks under the three categories of advisor response: (a) agreement, (b) disagreement, and (c) partial agreement and expansion.

8 (a) Advisor agreement:
NNS: So according to them I'm OK, then, right?
A : Yes, that's right.
(b) Advisor disagreement:
NS : So I only need 18 more credits if I stay with the MS?
A : Well, no let's see I guess we figured we needed three more because one of these wouldn't count. See, you've got 19.
(c) Advisor partial agreement and expansion:
NNS: So it's the right distribution you're checking on.
A : That's right. Then when you start taking those classes (etc.)

While both NSs and NNSs used confirmation checks in similar ways, in at least one instance the absence of this metalanguage in the speech of one NNS caused extra conversational work for the advisor. This finding is in accordance with Fiksdal (1988), who argued that in instances where NNSs did not use a confirmation check as acknowledgement of understanding the advisor's bad news, the advisor continued to re-explain the bad news throughout the rest of the interview.

As shown in example 9, the absence of a confirmation check caused prolonged discourse consequences. The advisor had instructed the NNS, in four separate instances throughout this interview, (turns 1, 3, 5, and 8) to choose a long-term advisor in the student's particular field. Only at the point at which a confirmation check was issued (turn 8) did he stop seeking confirmation of the student's understanding of his directive.

9 1 A: So it's up to you to pick one of those as an advisor.
2 S: Mm-hmm.
[other conversation]. . .
3 A: So you choose a professor in your specialty area, go see them and ask if they will be your advisor.

4 S: Yes.
[other conversation]. . .
5 A: So to get in the rest of the program find an advisor to help you.
6 S: Mm-hmm.
[other conversation]. . .
7 A: Ok, I really encourage you to find an advisor.
8 S: So, mm, we'd better we'd better meet some advisor?
9 A: Yes, that would be a good idea.

Conclusion

This paper has compared the production of and response to clarification questions in NS-NS and NS-NNS graduate advisement interviews. Analysis of the data has shown that clarification questions, which occur in both sets of interviews, pattern differently in the two data groups. The advisor used more clarification requests and comprehension checks to NNSs than to NSs, but he used more confirmation checks to NSs. Only NNS students received rather coercive types of confirmation checks and their response to this coercion is often problematic.

Both NS and NNS student groups issue confirmation checks to an equivalent degree, but with potentially differently weighted functions. That is, these questions may represent requests for clarification more for NNSs than for NSs and rapport more for NSs than for NNSs.

In teaching the function of these checks, it seems that ESL professionals should highlight the importance of mutual displays of solidarity and rapport by both conversational participants. At the same time, they must also let students know that confirmation checks may not be the most effective means of obtaining clarification because they may be misinterpreted as mere "conversational continuants" (Varonis and Gass, 1985) or signals of agreement.

Using authentic data as language models, however, may help teachers to minimize this risk of misinterpretation (especially if the data is collected by the students themselves). Instructors can present interesting examples of different functions of these question-types, whether challenging, rapport-sustaining or requesting clarification. They can also illustrate response forms of restatement and expansion, distinguishing the occasions that allow minimal responses from those that require more interactional work for one or both conversational participants. Techniques which NSs use can be

compared to those of high-level proficiency NNSs, and lower-level students can be taught how to practice and refine these strategies for their own use. Students can discuss, interpret, and experiment with these new patterns of discourse in their everyday conversational exchanges. In short, systematic cultural variations can be catalysts for discussion and learning, too.

Finally, with Thomas (1983) I suggest that TESL instructors need to seek explicit ways of teaching discourse norms in order to help students learn communicative strategies to better sustain conversation and avoid communicative failure. I hope that this analysis of communicative norms through interpretations of and responses to questions in the advisement setting will go some way toward this end.

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Transcription conventions

xxx nouns omitted to preserve anonymity
/ / words were unclear to transcriber
. . . short pause
/ interruption
CAPS emphasis

Notes

1. Long (1983a) distinguishes between strategies, which native speakers use to avoid conversational trouble (including comprehension checks) and tactics, which repair discourse when trouble occurs (including confirmation checks and clarification requests). In this paper, I avoid this distinction, using strategies in a general sense.

2. Explicit corrections by the advisor, a very direct source of metalinguistic input, were virtually absent, very unlike the findings of Day, Chenoweth, Chun, & Luppescu (1984) in peer-to-peer conversations. In the present study, out of 70 errors in the NNS speech, only 8 were corrected, or 11%. Furthermore, all of the corrected errors were factual errors. The remaining 60 errors,

excluding pronunciation errors, were composed of 27 errors in word choice, 20 syntactic errors and 12 omissions of words required by rules of standard English grammar, according to the categories of Chun, Day, Chenoweth and Luppescu (1982). So, students made very few errors and the ones they did make went virtually uncorrected unless the error concerned the truth value of an utterance.